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SUBJECT: UKRAINE: NATO, RUSSIAN LANGUAGE ISSUES ENTER ELECTION FRAY

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i., James Pettit for reasons 1.4 (b ,d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Party of Regions' recent decision to call for a referendum on neutrality (local shorthand for no NATO membership), and an official status for the Russian language resurrects divisive election themes, present in 2004 and 2006, that the major parties had tried to keep quiet so far in this campaign. Number 4 on the Regions list Inna Bohoslovska admitted to the Ambassador that this was a campaign ploy to build support among core supporters, but it may focus part of the debate on Ukraine's foreign orientation and Euroatlantic aspirations. Polls show voters focused primarily on bread-and-butter economic issues, and so far Our Ukraine-People's Self Defense (OU-PSD) and Bloc Yuliya Tymoshenko (BYuT) continue to emphasize anti-corruption and social/economic core messages, avoiding a NATO/Russian language debate that neither sees as in its interest. However, Regions campaign manager Borys Kolesnikov told the Ambassador that while there was a marketing aspect to raising these issues, giving the Russian language official status was also a campaign promise that Regions intended to keep.

¶2. (C) Comment. Just as in 2006, the campaign features a few smaller parties beating the anti-NATO drum, primarily Nataliya Vitrenko's Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine (PSPU) and the Communists. However, Regions' decision to raise the issue suggests it may be worried about support levels in the East, and reflects their sense that this will be a tight race. Regions leadership continue to cite the possibility that the loss of two percentage points of support could have significant impact in seat allocation in the new Rada. While the near-term impact of the PoR referendum will be damaging to NATO membership support levels, we anticipate it will be more limited in scope than the anti-NATO effort launched by the Ne Tak! bloc prior to the 2006 elections. We doubt that PoR is fully committed to the referendum issue as a post-election core goal, and anticipate that the initiative will be allowed to fade once it has served its purpose of energizing core voters. However, some members of Regions are likely to advocate for Russian language being granted official status, even after the elections. End Summary and Comment.

NATO/Russian Language Referendum

¶3. (C) The Party of Regions (PoR) on September 6 announced its intention to push for a referendum including questions on making Russian an official state language and supporting nonbloc status for Ukraine. Prior to the referendum announcement, PoR had generally refrained from interjecting either NATO or Russia/Russian language issues into the campaign, in sharp contrast with the 2004 and 2006 campaigns. Inna Bohoslovska, fourth on the PoR list, told the Ambassador during a September 6 meeting that PoR had to raise NATO and Russian-language issues, otherwise "we won't win".

Kolesnikov told the Ambassador September 18 that Regions had polling data that said 66 percent of Ukrainians support Ukraine's neutrality and 54 percent support official status for Russian language, with the number jumping to 85 percent in the East -- so part of the referendum was marketing to boost support. He cautioned, however, that Russia and Russian language were part of Ukraine's history and sooner or later, his party would get two state languages; the preterm elections had just made it sooner.

¶4. (SBU) The announcement is aimed at preempting other parties, primarily the Communists and PSPU, on these issues and solidifying core support. The signature-gathering process -- PoR has a nine million signature target, although only three million are required -- will provide PoR with another opportunity to raise NATO/Russian-language directly with voters. This behavior mirrors Regions' 2006 campaign, where the party's official platform made no mention of NATO or Russian language, but then they stumped for these issues as loudly as the leftist parties.

¶5. (SBU) Our Ukraine has stayed away from these issues publicly, focusing almost exclusively on its core anti-corruption message. Following the referendum announcement FM Yatsenyuk, third on the OU-PSD list, criticized Regions, stating that "the decision on NATO should be made by politicians elected by people. Don't attract attention to things Ukrainians don't need today, solve vital problems instead." OU-PSD is banking on opinion polls that show the referendum issues trailing bread-and-butter concerns among voters.

¶6. (SBU) Yuliya Tymoshenko has refrained from publicly

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joining the NATO fray, limiting herself to subtle digs at PM Yanukovich's ties to Russia. She recently demanded that Yanukovich confirm or deny reports that his recent vacation in Altai was paid for by Russian billionaire Vladimir Yevtushenkov, who BYuT claims is interested in the upcoming privatization of communications giant Ukrtelecom. Tymoshenko foreign policy advisor Hryhoriy Nemyria recently told Ambassador that he viewed the referendum as a sign of weakness on the part of Regions, signaling a loss of confidence. He noted that BYuT polling showed NATO and Russian language issues very low on a list of voter concerns.

Only PSPU leader Nataliya Vitrenko has maintained a steady drumbeat of anti-NATO rhetoric throughout the campaign.

A Different Party Landscape

¶7. (SBU) The most outspoken proponent in 2006 election of the pro-Russian and anti-NATO/US views as main campaign message was the Ne Tak! bloc, which is not on the ballot this time. Ne Tak! was extremely vocal and well financed -- it launched an anti-NATO referendum campaign similar to the current PoR effort that had a sharp negative effect on public support levels for alliance membership. Although the 2006 referendum gathered sufficient signatures to be brought before the electorate, it received a pocket-veto from President Yushchenko as the Constitution contains no time limit for Presidential review of a proposed referendum.

¶8. (SBU) Vitrenko's PSPU received strong financial support in 2006 from Russian businessman Maksim Kurochkin (shot dead in Kyiv this winter), but has seemed to lack the same deep pockets in 2007. Current polling has the PSPU well below the 3-percent hurdle (it fell just short in 2006). Similarly, the Communist Party ran a strongly anti-West/NATO campaign in 2006 and is doing so again in 2007. These parties efforts have been supported to some degree by second-tier Russian politicians, such as Aleksandr Dugin, Konstantin Zatulin, Kirill Frolov, and Vladimir Zhirinovsky, making the same

anti-West/NATO statements in Southern Ukraine and Crimea.

Signal to Moscow?

¶9. (C) During a September 10 meeting, OU-PSD head Yuriy Lutsenko told the Ambassador that the referendum was a signal of increased Yanukovych/Moscow ties, and that Putin wanted the anti-NATO, pro-Russian language issues raised as a way to signal Russian voters that things were "going right for them in Ukraine." Serhiy Taran, a Kyiv political analyst, has described the current campaign as the first instance since Ukrainian independence that "Russia has not made a strong official statement about Ukrainian politics." Taran believes Russia is unsure of who could serve as a reliable partner in Ukraine, and that the upcoming Russian election has focused top-level Russian politicians on domestic issues.

¶10. (U) Visit Embassy Kyiv's classified website:
www.state.sgov.gov/p/eur/kiev.

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